

SOCIAL LIFE AND CUSTOMS

RANDOM NOTES

By FISHER AMES

At one period in the march of fashion a Duxbury lady's bonnet had the shape of a longish tube or horizontal funnel at the farther end of which the face of the wearer might have been discerned like a coy bumblebee at the bottom of a pumpkin blossom. A man could not have stolen a kiss from a belle so bonneted without crawling into the tube as General Putnam did into the wolf's den with a rope around his leg. It was cynically observed that this was the true reason why the mouth of the tube grew wider and still wider until it attained the more accessible shape of the coal-scuttle.

Throughout early New England beavers had several runs for winter wear; gypsy hats and cottage bonnets were for summer only. The coal-scuttle form stoutly resisted total elimination, but gradually it had to yield to the trend toward expansion until it reached its last metamorphosis in the enormously wide Leghorns and Navarinos. The broad flopping brim of these could be circumvented if one bent low enough, but at a little distance they effectually masked the faces underneath just as the equally spreading skirts and outer wraps made all figures look alike.

Rough Going for Men

It was a difficult period for the gallant male Duxburyite. Unless his glance grew into a long deliberate inspection he was quite apt to cut some of his female acquaintances. To complicate matters, the women objected to anything in the nature of a bold looking-over. It was an age of the most delicious delicacy. Blushing modesty was considered the foremost feminine virtue and lessons were actually given in how to attract attention. The effacement of sex, in public, was the essential attribute of good breeding.

Consider however the somewhat puzzling case of Miss Mullins, better known simply as Priscilla. She is imaginatively pictured in an issue of the old Duxbury Budget as, "Of medium size, of prompt, decisive nature, one who would not let the right moment slip by unused." She was not reading a novel on the day of John Alden's eventful call, but busy as usual with other more worthwhile things. She was willing, however to lay aside her duties and listen to John and when he had put in a matrimonial bid for his friend, "blushing celestial rosy-red," she popped the question on her own behalf.

Did She Demur?

Afterwards, "did Priscilla demur and protest she had not meant the half she said? I hope she did, for after such a forward step a few backward ones are altogether right and proper; and indeed in such a case, such retreat on the woman's part is only the attainment of a proper distance, so that at the right moment she can, with fit momentum, rush into arms that are ready for her." No guess about the readiness of John's arms was made, or whether he was braced for the maiden's rush. Our theory is that young Mr. Alden was considerably taken aback if not quite floored for the moment by this departure from all the rules of courtship of his times.

In those and even much later times men had to be more bold, dashing and predatory than today when such a course instead of resulting in a long pursuit might bring on a quick head-on collision. Men flaunted their masculinity, especially in the superabundance of their whiskers. They wore thickly padded coats, virile high boots, sported massive watch-chains and heavy canes—symbolic of the cave man's club. Under the soft gloves of their society manners it was understood a fist of steel lurked. The role so effectually swelled the male ego that civilized man reached perhaps his apogee then. He has never had occasion since to be quite so satisfied with himself.

With other fashions, other manners. In close coordination with the emancipation of women the male of the species gracefully relinquished the fiction, always a strain to maintain, of his God-given superiority. He had had his long over lordship. Woman was in the position of the four-and-twenty blackbirds baked in a pie with a particularly tough and suffocating crust over her. Priscilla Mullins was one of the early ones to show signs of an ability to peck her way out.

The Common Weal

A mild form of communism was one of the main social principles distinguishing all the New England settlements of Priscilla's day. Whatever his circumstances no one was strong enough to stand alone. Every man was expected to put the common good before his private interests. He was first and foremost a member of a unit whose existence depended upon the cooperation of all.

Every Duxbury man had to learn to bear arms in readiness to take the field for the protection of the community. He had to do his share of clearing away the forest and preparing the ground for seed. He must lend what tools he had to the neighbor who needed them. When epidemics struck he had either to nurse the sick or fill the place they occupied as providers. Any failure to meet these obligations was punishable by a fine.

Duxbury had its "commons"—land owned and controlled by the settlers as a group. Nominally privately owned land sometimes could not be sold, especially to non-residents, without the consent of the community. Common grazing grounds for all cattle and sheep were often provided. At one time the latter were pastured out on Clark's Island, and the various owners were strictly forbidden to sell any of their animals outside the town.

Where Was Democracy?

There was less democracy in the early New England town meetings than in those of today. The right to vote was denied some of the men and all of the women. The church and social leaders held the reins of all local affairs, and the whip as well. Back of the Moderator's chair stood the Elders, religiously as stiffly formal and needlessly austere as they were politically powerful. Making the observance of religion the trying and useless burden they did, one can guess that their direction of the pay affairs of the town was equally illiberal and bigoted.

An exception should be made in the case of Plymouth and Duxbury. The Pilgrims were less harsh and arbitrary in the conduct of town affairs than the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay. Possibly this was due to the influence of a man whom they respected above all others, the Rev. John Robinson, who by word and deed had always counseled toleration. Even with this leavening, in the Pilgrim form of government it would be difficult to say where there was any civil authority entirely distinct from ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

If the Robinson teachings worked for moderation there are some who think that environment had its contrary influence on the character of the Pilgrims. If they had landed at a point much farther south as they had hoped to do what permanent effect would that have had upon their community? The difference between New England's cold bleak shore with its long winters and its soil about as inhospitable as the weather, and the gentler climate and more fertile soil of Virginia might have softened them to such an extent as to completely alter the sharp imprint they left upon the history of the country.